

Bidwell Mansion  
525 Esplanade Street  
Chico  
Butte County  
California

HABS No. CA-1317

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Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20240

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

BIDWELL MANSION

Chico, Butte County, California

ADDRESS: 525 Esplanade, Chico, California

OWNER: State of California

OCCUPANT: State of California

USE: Proposed House Museum

ARCHITECTURAL AND HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

John Bidwell was an important figure in California history. One of the successful early gold miners (Bidwell's Bar), he went on to purchase a very large acreage in the Chico area (about 26,000 acres) and to make it into one of the show place farms and horticultural centers of his time. Bidwell's marriage to Annie Kennedy precipitated completion of a great mansion, to replace the early cabin and later two-story adobe house in which Bidwell had been living. Begun in 1864 and completed in 1868, with Henry Cleaveland of San Francisco as architect, the Bidwell Mansion cost between \$56,000 and \$60,000 to build.

A massive residence of brick, with a central tower on the facade and encircling one-story veranda of wood, Bidwell's new Mansion represented the Italian Villa at its purest in California. As the social center of Bidwell's vast Rancho Arroyo Chico, it was a mecca for the great and near-great of his time. After Mrs. Bidwell's death, the house was willed to the Presbyterian Church to be utilized as a Girls School. Due to lack of funds the Mansion was sold in 1921 for \$10,000 to the State of California for Chico Normal School (now Chico State College). Used variously by the School, the building is now being restored by the Division of Beaches and Parks and will be a complete House Museum. Rancho Chico and Bidwell Adobe is California Registered Historical Landmark No. 329. The Bidwell Mansion, nearby, was completed in 1868.

HISTORICAL INFORMATION:

John Bidwell was born at Ripley, Chautauqua County, New York on August 5, 1819. He died at Rancho Chico on April 4, 1900. Partly due to the persuasive letters written back to Missouri by John Marsh of Contra Costa County, Bidwell came to California in the Bidwell-Bartleson Party of 1841 - and was disillusioned by Marsh's shrewd reception of that group on his great Rancho Los Meganos. Bidwell went to work for John Sutter at the latter's Fort in what is now Sacramento. (He later declined Sutter's offer of his daughter's hand in marriage.) In 1844, Bidwell was naturalized as a Mexican citizen in order to receive a grant of land. His first grant, the Rancho Ulpinas near the present town of Rio Vista, was later exchanged with F. B. Reading for land in San Francisco. Bidwell's discovery and removal of gold from the Feather River (at what became known as Bidwell's Bar) gave him the capital to acquire Rancho Arroyo Chico. Rancho Chico had been a grant of five square leagues on either side of Big Chico Creek to William Dickey by Governor Micheltorena at Monterey. On March 6, 1844, Dickey became a naturalized Mexican and the grant was made official on November 18, 1844.

Dickey occupied the land during 1845, but later sold to George McKinstry who sold it to Bidwell. A patent to Rancho Chico, signed by President Buchanan, was issued April 4, 1860 and went on final record at Oroville, California, on October 18th of that year - based on a U. S. survey made in July 1859, by A. W. von Schmidt. The original rancho consisted of about 22,200 acres; additional purchases brought it ultimately to about 26,000 acres.<sup>1</sup>

During the summer of 1849, Bidwell had erected an oak and sycamore log cabin, chinked with mud. The cabin burned in 1852 and Bidwell then had a two story adobe constructed <sup>2</sup> (in the manner of the adobes at Monterey) which remained his residence until final completion of the Mansion in 1868.<sup>3</sup> The great new center of Bidwell's empire was designed by Henry Cleaveland (architect of Ralston's old Palace Hotel and, reputedly, of Ralston's house at Belmont which was finished slightly later than Bidwell's Mansion). Construction on the Bidwell residence occupied the period from the spring of 1864 to spring of 1868; and then Bidwell with his new bride from Washington, D. C., Annie E. Kennedy Bidwell, moved in to make it their home for thirty years of more.<sup>4</sup>

The estimated cost of the house alone was \$56,500; however, development of the service areas and of the grounds around the house must have entailed an expenditure of considerably more than that. Bidwell was a generous and constant host, to a wide variety of friends and acquaintances. The spirit of Rancho Chico was infinitely more bucolic and tranquil than the rather hectic atmosphere at Belmont; but the hospitality was equally lavish in both. Bidwell became a dedicated gentleman farmer, and developed a wide variety of productive crops - some new and hitherto unknown to California.<sup>5</sup> John Bidwell had experimented with grape growing early in his California days, and continued this for some time into the 1860's; however, his later enthusiasm for temperance restrained his interest in viticulture.<sup>6</sup> The area around the Bidwell Mansion became a veritable paradise-park of 150 acres, with hundreds of ornamental trees, a deer park, flower gardens and all kinds of fruits and vegetables. Over a hundred persons were employed year 'round at Rancho Chico, with many more at seasonal peaks of growing. Living like feudal lords, General and Mrs. Bidwell nevertheless became the principal benefactors of their region.<sup>7</sup>

The town of Chico was founded by Bidwell in 1860, and he continued to give large amounts of land for public schools, churches, etc. His treatment of the Indians was considered fair for his time; among his contemporaries, Bidwell was one of the few who attempted to assist them - albeit as a kind of benevolent despot. After Bidwell's death, Mrs. Bidwell continued to live in the mansion until her death in 1918. She had conveyed to the City of Chico, in 1905, about 1900 acres of land as a park in her husband's memory. In 1911, she added considerably to this gift - making a total of 2400 acres for Chico and the State of California. Her net worth remained extensive (estimated at about \$1,000,000) after these benefactions - most of it in city lots and larger tracts of land. Mrs. Bidwell's will specified disposal of the house to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, which found it a white elephant. Thus, the State of California was able to acquire the house for \$10,000 in 1921 - to be used for a State Normal School. It was first a dormitory, then the Art and Homemaking Department of what became known as Chico State College. The State decided on massive restorative measures, when the College felt it had no further use for the building; and with the expenditure of at least \$250,000 the Mansion is being converted into a House Museum. Five acres of land were given to the Division of Beaches and Parks of the State of California (which handles the restoration and museum installation) as a setting for the old Mansion.

NOTES (Historical Information)

1. The history of Bidwell's acquisition of the land is rather confusing; Hunt, Bidwell, Prince of Pioneers, pp. 247-249, has a clear summary although details may need correction or up-dating. William Dickey had been declared owner in fee simple after his grant was confirmed on November 18, 1844. Dickey's sale to McKinstry of his livestock and ranch interest, amounted to one-half of the original five square leagues. Bidwell paid McKinstry \$1,785 for an "undivided half of the rancho". In 1850 George McKinstry conveyed his other half-interest in Rancho Chico to Justus McKinstry; and on February 25, 1851, Justus McKinstry conveyed this half-interest to John Bidwell for \$9,000. On May 31, 1852, William Dickey gave Bidwell a quitclaim deed for any rights, titles or interests he might have had in the grant.
2. This so-called Mechoopka (Me-choop-ka) adobe, built by the local Indians for Bidwell in 1852, is commemorated by a site marker placed by the Pioneer Historical Society and the Native Sons of the Golden West, assisted by the Chico Chapter of the D.A.R.; see Hoover and Rensch, p. 73.
3. It is sometimes said that the plans for the Bidwell Mansion were privately purchased and presented to the California Historical Society; no record of them remains at the Society. However, the Division of Beaches and Parks at Chico obtained copies of the plans for the first and second floors only, which Cleaveland's son gave to Chico State (plans dated 1865).
4. Floods in the spring of 1865, delays in plastering, etc., slowed the completion of the house. A Mr. Harris was foreman of construction. Basic structural work was apparently finished in 1864; financial limitations delayed interior details until 1868.
5. Bidwell's prowess as a horticulturist attracted scientific attention from an international group. Sir Joseph Hooker, the eminent English horticulturist paid a visit to Chico, and had a giant oak named in his honor; Asa Gray, the American natural scientist, was also a guest and correspondent of Bidwell. In his experimental orchard near the Mansion, Bidwell grew one specimen of over four hundred different varieties of fruits; ultimately 1800 acres were dedicated to this study of the adaptability of trees and plants to California.

6. Bidwell was importantly connected with the raisin industry in California; he found this a natural carryover from his viticulture. Becoming an ardent prohibitionist, he tore up his vineyards in 1868 and forbade the use of any spirits in his home. He ran for the office of President of the United States on the Prohibitionist ticket in 1892 - see Hoover and Rensch, pp. 73-74.

7. Bidwell was in the California State Militia during the Civil War; earlier he had been a state senator in 1864, and became a member of the 39th Congress (1864-1867). His title of General, which was used consistently by contemporaries in later years, came from his commission in the California State Militia.

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS AND SOURCES:

Bancroft, H. H. History of California, IV, p. 269.

Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley: Bidwell Papers (various personal papers, maps, etc. - including an inventory of household goods compiled by Mrs. Bidwell in the early 20th century; see especially, C-B 468 Pt. I. Carton 2).

Benjamin, Marcus. John Bidwell, Pioneer, Washington, 1907, pp. 32-34.

California State Library, California Section, Sacramento: documents and original papers relating to Bidwell and Rancho Arroyo del Chico (deed, diaries, drawings, maps, etc.).

Cody, Cora Edith. John Bidwell: His Early Career in California. M. A. thesis, History Department, University of California, Berkeley, 1927 (copy deposited in Bancroft Library, Berkeley).

Hawke, Marialyce R. Bidwell Mansion. Paper submitted to Art 188B, University of California, Davis, January 15, 1965.

Hoover and Rensch. Historic Spots in California (one vol. ed.; revised), Stanford University Press, 1948, pp. 73-74.

Hunt, Rockwell. John Bidwell, Prince of California Pioneers. Caldwell (Idaho), Caxton Printers, 1942, pp. 247-249, pp. 275-276.

Hunt, Rockwell. Personal Sketches of California Pioneers I Have Known, Stockton, University of Pacific, 1962, pp. 1-16.

Lewis, Oscar. Here Lived the Californians. New York, Rinehart and Company, 1957, pp. 66-67

Neider, James. Bidwell Mansion, State Historical Monument, Chico, State Department of Resources, 1964 (report; also personal interviews with Mr. Neider, who has kindly read this Photo-Data Book with a sharp critical eye).

Parry, C. C. "Rancho Chico", Overland Monthly, Vol. XI, No. 66 (2nd Series) June 1888, pp. 561-576.

#### ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

##### EXTERIOR

John Bidwell's Mansion was constructed of soft brick, locally made. The foundations are between twelve and sixteen bricks wide; walls above are built with brick shells and an air space between. The exterior was plastered and painted from the beginning, to protect the soft brick; the interior walls were covered with lath and plaster, painted. (Most of the building materials came from the area, as is clear in letters Bidwell wrote to his foreman, Harris, from Washington.) In plan and style, the house is one of the purest examples of the Italian Villa in the west. It belongs to the earlier and more symmetric type of Villa, evolving out of the Georgian house plan with Romantic planning and styling. A lofty, three story tower is centered on the facade, projecting saliently from that facade. From the central hall, open all of the first floor rooms. Those at the back have large slanted bays at the east and west. (The house actually faces to the north-northeast; but for purposes of descriptive simplicity I will assume that the main facade with the tower is east, and the rear is west.) One can see here, clearly, the development from late 18th century and early 19th century house plans in the eastern United States to the increasingly expansive "irregular" plans of the late 19th century. The second floor of the Bidwell Mansion is more illustrative of this Victorian irregularity than the first.

A wide wood veranda once encircled the house completely; however, revisions to the northeast area of the back and side in the early

20th century, removed that portion of veranda. The brick shell is stylistically neutral, except as it forms the flattened arches at the head of most windows of the first and second floors (suggesting the Tudor arch of Victorian Gothic), the rounded arches of the tower (Italianate), and creates the Villa envelope of the house shape. Massive projecting cornices of wood (all exterior wood is redwood) over the second story windows combine Italianate misunderstandings of Classical details (the elongated consoles) with pierced patterns characteristic of Eastlake; the date of construction in the latter 1860's would confirm this transitional character.

On the veranda, the pillars have panelled surfaces on all four faces (typically Italianate); but again the brackets (modified consoles), between pillars and horizontal beams under the veranda's second level balcony, are richly pierced with floreate patterns. The same thing is true of the elongated consoles in the cornice of the second floor. On the tower, smaller modillion-like blocks accent the top of the second floor (actually almost at the third level) and more elaborate pierced consoles accent the roof cornice. Both veranda and tower roof have balustrades above, with Georgian styled carved balusters and stubby corner posts with panelled surfaces. Brick sills of windows are plain, and windows are divided into four tall, narrow panes with thin wood muntins, and the usual heavier wood mullion where the double-hung action divides upper and lower window sections. (On the facade, both on the first and second floor, flanking the tower, the windows are paired - this again is reminiscent of the Victorian Gothic, although here the windows are firmly separated by a small wall section.) The main roof was shingled and minor roofs are covered in metal sheathing. Additions at the north and west rear were accomplished about 1908 and 1909 and again in 1921. This added more space for kitchen and washroom areas, etc. A small two story separate structure lies directly west of the house; this apparently was intended for the "outside help".

Originally painted a salmon pink with brown trim, the house was changed to an overall white in the 20th century. After restoration is completed, by about 1972, the exterior will again be painted the original color.

#### INTERIOR

On the first floor of the Bidwell Mansion are four major rooms - in addition to the entry and long hall which divides the first floor down



the center. To the right as one entered was a drawing room, with dining room behind; to the left was Bidwell's study, then the stair to the second floor, and a large library at the rear. Behind the dining room was a separate wing for kitchen, laundry, etc. At this area, the revisions of about 1908 or 1909 and 1921 extended space and revised functions; the kitchen became a servants' room and a new kitchen was located in the 1909 addition. Presently, the "interpretation" area (exhibitions about the history of house and its occupants) and local Beaches and Parks' officer's office are in the additions of 1921 and 1909 to the northwest. The house was floored throughout with "bull" pine (*Pinus sabiniana*) and the walls were covered with lath and plaster, then painted. The absence of wallpaper in the original interior decor was unusual for the period. Rooms are about sixteen feet high on the first floor, and have the fairly elaborate series of moldings characteristic of upper to ceiling wall areas of the era. The house was gas lighted at the time that John Bidwell lived; electricity was for the first floor only with plugs in the floor and no rewiring of ceiling fixtures. Notable interior features of the first floor are the slate fireplace surrounds, marbleized in green or red tones. Lofty pier glasses surmount most of the mantels.

The present arrangement of furniture, and most of the actual furniture itself, is due to gifts received and provisionally arranged by the Division of Beaches and Parks; original function of any given room has not yet been exactly recreated, as the former office is now (for example) decorated as a bedroom, etc. On the veranda, basketweave brick paving is used for flooring, with wooden flooring on the balcony above - outside the second floor rooms.

This second floor is reached by a handsome large staircase at the west of the house, mentioned earlier. Its banister and carved balusters are of mahogany.<sup>1</sup> On the second floor were four large bedrooms and two smaller ones plus two baths (back to back) for the family, with two servants' bedrooms and a bath over the kitchen wing below. These rooms were plastered, with moldings near the ceiling; they were about 12 feet high. The main stair continues to a third floor with a large open space in the center (intended for billiards), surrounded by well finished storage areas under the roof. Above the larger central space is a skylight, now partially darkened. At the south, a small staircase leads to a tower viewing area. Throughout the house, recessed louvered shutters provide privacy and light control for the principal windows. There is a basement under the west wing, and a small pit for wood-burning furnace under the library.<sup>2</sup>

NOTES (Architectural Information)

1. There are two "H's" carved (in very small letters) into the top of the Newel post. Could this be foreman Harris' modest imprint on the house?
2. The furnace served only the first floor; it was not very effective.

SITE

The Bidwell Mansion now occupies about five acres of its former 26,000-plus acres, and is contiguous to Chico State College's grounds and buildings. Its street location is on Esplanade, between So-wie-len-no and West Francis Willard. The splendid old trees and bushes are a slight indication of Bidwell's horticultural enthusiasms and the truly extraordinary profusion of vegetation on the former Rancho Chico, much of which is either part of other parks in Chico, is included in the city's residential areas developed from Bidwell land, or has been destroyed.

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